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Some specifics of foreign language teaching

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Abstract

The article deals with the main principles of foreign language teaching on the background of the system of linguistic competencies and language skills. To explore this topic further, the author provides the examples from her own many years' experience in the field of teaching German at the Faculty of Management and Informatics at Hradec Kralove. Her explanations are completed with a new view at German as a language. In the absence of a contrastive Czech-German grammar, this view may have a motivation function in university students' language study.

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1. Introduction

Learning and teaching a foreign language is a very broad didactical area. To provide a frame-work to comprehend this breadth we have limited the area in this way: it concerns the common, not academic or professional German language learned by the university students whose mother tongue is Czech language. They were limited after they had passed their entrance examinations. German was a part of their tests. They had completed the secondary schools and finished them with their successful final exams. German was probably one of the subject of their finals. They had been taught ordinary conversational German, not a professional language even if they had studied at a secondary professional schools. German is an optional subject at the faculty, therefore we can suppose the high level of motivation of the students who have chosen to study just this subject.

As for the secondary schools mentioned, the difference among them is not in their specificities, but in their level. The faculty entrance examination is very benevolent and it cannot show the diversity of levels.

The German language as a faculty subject does not have its special lectures, all the language teaching is done at seminary lessons, one two-hour-lesson in a week. Thus there are 15 such seminars in a term. The students who have chosen German, have compulsory presence at the seminary lessons. The learners are organized into seminary groups without any considerations their interests, ages, gender, and their different knowledge of German up to now. The teaching is led by a teacher using various didactic aids and forms including eLearning. He usually works with his own texts, with recordings of conversational German or with monological specimens of standard German. He can suppose that the students have at their disposal the textbooks used at the secondary school and containing the basic grammar. The teacher targets his teaching in written and spoken language in its active and passive mastering, in conversations and in short parts of monological performances.

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The educational goal of the teaching is to acquire the passive and active foreign language knowledge. The passive knowledge means to understand a common professionally unspecified text, e.g. a piece of topical information in a newspaper, in various guidebooks, some organization directions or public announcements etc. To understand the language of works of fiction remains not relevant in this case. The active knowledge means to master a simple conversation or correspondence. A certain degree of correctness is supposed in both cases as it is expected with a university individual. The achievement of absolute accuracy is not supposed in this case.

The first term is always the most important for the next process of university schooling. It is the beginning of the six-term cycle in that the foreign language teaching proceeds. The teacher's responsibility at its beginning is to find out as much as possible about the every single student's real state of language knowledge and in accordance with this state to set the seminary group's targets of teaching. It is suitable to give the students a concise and complete scheme of the organization and terms of examination etc. The important thing in teachers's planning will be the variation of proceedings and methods so that the teaching would not tedious and boring. But at the same time it will be useful to make sure that there would be the harmonious representation of mastering both passive and active German in the target of each seminary lesson and I its progress.

From the point of students' view, the first term is important because they must acquire – as quickly as possible the change of learning methods. Very important in this connection is the fact, that the teacher will not use the pressure of regular testing or checking of students' preparation for every single seminary lesson, but he will rely more on their personal responsibility in the attitude to learning, on their own motivation. The change of teaching techniques used at secondary schools – requires also the change of learning. To divide the two-hour seminary lesson into two single one-hour lesson in a week might prove its worth as a temporary solution in the first term.

My experience of many past years leads me to the recommending to divide an establishment of preceding students' language knowledge into two tests following very closely each other. In both cases it is always suitable to point out, that the tests are not the cases of any exam, that their purpose is to find out what the students need first of all both in the area of grammar and of vocabulary. To give both cases more breach of faith, the teacher may allow the students not to give their signatures at their worksheets. The tests should be relatively short; on account should they take up the time of the whole seminary lesson. It is a case of setting the level of knowledge. The establishment of skills (under – standing listened word, understanding a read text, prompt wording of a simple reality) is better to be done later at different suitable occasions. The students work with tasks on special worksheets in both given cases. These having been handed in, the teacher might analyse some mistakes that he finds by random. He takes the more detailed analysis at home.

The test establishing at least an approximate scale of students vocabulary should contain very common words only. This is the case even the special characteristics of German, the compound words. They should appear in the test if they have really high frequency (e.g. Trinkwasser, Krankenhaus, Mittelschule; wegnehmen, sicherstellen; ganztglich, langweilig etc.). When the worksheets are handed in, the teacher might mention the difference between the passive and active knowledge of language and the relations of a suitable dictionary as a study aid to the both kinds of knowledge. He might highlight that for passive acquiring may be useful a dictionary providing not only the meaning or meanings of a word, but also its grammar and stylistically characteristics. At the same time, the teacher might refer to advantages of a monolingual dictionary that accompanies the given word with short example sentences showing its suitable usage and its basic grammar characteristics. The dictionary most suitable for the discussed kind of study should contain the concise explanation of the word, example sentence or sentences, grammar characteristics and also its translation and its synonyms.

Before dealing with the individual areas of teaching and their methods I want to point out one basic fact: The teacher's oral performance in a foreign language is the most important aid to passive language knowledge. He should put this language in his explanations and alternate his speed of speaking. He should put in short narratives, different announcements, reminders, but also his reading of short newspaper articles etc. He does not need to demand a commentary of these short speeches of his students, the important thing is that they will meet such performances in every lesson and get used to the listening of spoken language in this way.

To study a foreign language is a matter of memory. Therefore, it is not suitable to reject memorizing of some important language facts as a method, that must be used by the student who has forgotten some learnt material that

he had known at the secondary school. He consequently will memorize e.g. the prepositions following the same case, the separable or inseparable prefixes of verbs, the past forms of so called strong German verbs etc. If he returns to his secondary-school textbook, it will be important not to do with repeating and memorizing rules, but to pay attention to the attached exercises that he had missed sometimes long ago and to return to them before forgetting the gist of the memorized phenomenon. And he even has to return to them repeatedly. He himself usually recognizes the moment from which the acquirement is lasting and permanent and the returns to such a phenomenon are therefore not necessary.

Another common method is impersonation. All language teaching is accompanied by a supposition of the appropriate accuracy of pronunciation. The students might be supposed to acquire the pronunciation standard of literary German at the secondary school already and therefore it is not necessary for the higher education to tackle this problem. But sometimes this is not the case. If so, the student should not avoid the task of repeating a selected context after the listened recording of the native speaker's language or reading a text after the teacher's example. Whenever the teacher uses those tasks, he certainly has a good reason for doing so. This does not have to be about the pronunciation of words only, but e.g. about the practising of the intonation of example sentences, about the modulation of subordinate clauses etc. A suitable exercise here is to transcribe the heard sentences listened to in their natural quality and speed even if they sometimes contain new words that can be supposed as being unknown to the students. In this case, the teacher has to secure the repeated listening and a time gap between sentences, in order that the student would have enough time to put the given sentences down. Such transcriptions might be of course a big mine of information for the teacher and therefore it is suitable to check the transcription results. This progress may be sometimes renewed by other task: The students must write down e.g. a grammar rule that the teacher formulates in German or an important statement or an interesting quotation. But also these transcriptions should be checked.

There is a lack of a printed contrast grammar of Czech and German on the market. The teacher therefore should take advantage of each opportunity of pointing out the differences between both languages. Such a background may become even a source of new attitudes to the language system. Such attitudes might be quite new for the students and therefore they might have a certain motivation function. The gist of the problem is, that a certain language phenomenon has not been shown as an isolated one, but in its proportions. As an example may serve adjectives as basis of other derivate words.

First an identical characteristic trait: The adjectives denoting material remain uncompared in both languages. Then the novum: in Czech, the derivation takes place predominantly from the first grade in Czech, but from the first (A) or second grade (B) in German: A: frei → Freiheit; frei → befreien → Befreiung. B: Klar → Klarheit; Klar → erklären → Erklärung. The teacher enlarges both types with other concrete examples. He adds some compound words with an adjective basis, e.g.: Freizeit, freiwillig. The students might try to work out what do the new words mean, from the meanings of their morphemes. It is suitable to connect the explanation by adding some example sentences both to the type A and B. The example sentences may be probably more clear than a longer text taking a lot of time.

In the whole progress of teaching it is necessary to take into consideration all communicative competencies. Each of them is important in its specific way. Even the strategic competency is significant as a means of communication. Its basic principle is a specific quick-wittedness: in certain situation a speaker is not able to recollect right away or he does not simply have the equivalent of a Czech word. Then he should be able to express its meaning by means of a suitable paraphrase. If you enter e.g. a German stationer's shop to buy a ballpoint pen, by its appellations just does not enter in your mind, you might simply ask "something to write with". A ballpoint will certainly be among the things that the shop assistant will offer you. The strategic competency is a kind of linguistic help in difficulty.

More important is of course the sociolinguistic competency. It is concerned with the sociocultural conditions which any foreign language speaker must respect. The social circumstances decide on the selection of language items for any specific kind of communication. It is e.g. important to teach a student how to introduce himself in a certain atmosphere, how to compose and word an apology or invitation politely, how to cancel a meeting with a foreign business partner or with firm representative, how to couch in writing an order, how to compose and stylize a complaint etc. In all such cases there is not only vocabulary that is important, but also a necessary grammatical

accuracy. The taking account of the future students' career always plays its significant role by the range and selection of subject matter and schoolwork.

The grammatical competency is of course the basis of the teaching German as an integral whole. Even its vocabulary with grammatical characteristics of some word classes is important. While the grammar is given by the language system, the vocabulary presents a very sensitive spot of students' preparation. Maximum attention must be paid to this subject matter. Many years' experience shown that it is necessary to equip students first of all with the words which define the most different articles of everyday use, especially the different kinds and types of foods, further the designations of the organs of human body and the health troubles. For that matter I think that the vocabulary oriented in this way should be a subject matter of teaching at the secondary school already,

The content of grammatical competency is made by phonology (sometimes combined with phonetics in a teaching process), further morphology and syntax. When it comes to morphology, it is first of all a case of formal morphology dealing with the forms of words, in the first place with declension and conjugation forms. Tradition has it, that the language study at high schools and universities concentrates itself first of all on this competency. This concentration has two basic and very different ways in the didactical praxis. The delimitating factor is the fact if we teach about a language or a language itself. This decision influences the ordering of components of learnt material. In the first case we will probably present nouns first, namely in line with their gender and type of their declension, then the verbs and their types of conjugation, further adjectives etc. But if we want a student to come to the ability of active use of a foreign language as soon as possible, we prefer another arrangement of learnt material: We put pronouns on the first place (in chronological order: personal, possessive, demonstrative), the verbs in present tense further nouns in their accusatives (the most frequent case in any conversation) crosswise the declension system. The teacher will decide on the basic process of teaching, a text book might have only a supplementary function and serves first of all as a mine of exercises of different types.

The discourse competency is an example of the application of the grammatical competency. It has two basic areas: the area of making a speech (the constructive area) and the field of understanding a speech (the area of perception and interpretation). From the teaching praxis point of view it proves desirable and very advantageous to omit the standpoint of perception here and to postpone it to the area of making language skills, such as reading with understanding and listening with understanding. The stand points will always be combined into pairs in teaching praxis. The concrete progress will be directed e.g. On the construction of a written discourse in the scope of a sentence, another one will be concentrated on the construction of a spoken discourse in the scope of a whole etc.

The language skills also make up certain pairs: speaking and listening with understanding, writing and reading with understanding. If we take into consideration what has been said about communicative competencies it would be possible to understand the language skills as the receptive ones (listening with understanding, reading with understanding) and as the productive one (a spoken or written discourses).

Then in this connection the following three remarks are important. First, the student might acquire the receptive discourse skills without mastering any productive skills. Further: The commanding of receptive skills and their training is easier than acquiring and mastering the productive skills. And it is valid, that the training of language skills is not possible without any closely proceeding or simultaneous training of receptive skills.

All that just has been said is in very close connections with enrolling university students and their language schooling. A superiority of their receptive language skills would be a reliable criterion of their knowledge also in the admitting process. The receptive skills can constitute the overall level of their language knowledge very well. But this point of view has not been used for organization reasons. All the more so we should be clear in our minds about the language skills of all admitted students. To find out their level should be facilitated by an entrance test. It therefore should contain first of all the questions and tasks of a receptive kind, or such tasks only.

When we begin to teach listening with understanding, we put on the programme the context with one theme only. It is very suitable when such theme presents one person only. If possible, we use the speech extracts of native speakers. Even if we have at our disposal such monothematic recordings, it is usually suitable to give the recording's theme in advance, so that learners know what its gist is; we can add one or two key words. If so, we explain their meanings. Both these steps are especially important if the recording brings a specimen of a professional or academic discourse. More difficult from the listening point of view is the process when two people speak to one theme in a

little different style. And in addition even more difficult is the situation when some wordings and standpoints to the theme are being said in a form of a natural dialogue. We often consider carefully the possibility of repeated listening of the record.

The control of understanding the listened text cannot be restricted to its contents only. We assign the task to students to examine if the recording is an appeal, a query, a plain announcement, an instruction, a piece of advice, an urgent request for help etc. these tasks represent the sociolinguistic competency. We can continue with the grammatical competency, for example: Say, which tools in language acquisition support your opinion. The key words should already be incorporated in initial clauses expressing the contents. The tasks e.g. give your opinion which person expresses his or her standpoint with greater enthusiasm strengthens the sociolinguistic competency.

Reading with understanding may be divided into different types. We begin with a specimen of a narrative eighth one narrator only. It is usually enough if a student reads such an extract only once. A passage of a professional text might be read repeatedly either as a whole or in certain parts in the connection with tasks. If we give the work with a certain specimen as a home preparation, we can suppose students having some dictionaries to their disposal.

Speaking is always connected with the training of other skills. We distinguish the skill and the communicative competency: To address somebody is a skill. To talk to someone and to strike up a conversation with them is a communicative competency. Reading or listening might be closed with the reproduction of contents as a spoken discourse. The spoken discourses independent on a preceding text are always more difficult.

Writing is sometimes used as one of ways how to find out the student's level of language knowledge. It may be connected with listening (as a reproduction) or with reading (as the reproduction of a narrative or as excerpts from a professional text) or as a form of an exercise with a subject matter not went over before.

If we have to incorporate exam situations, we arrange the contents of tests in a different ways. To simplicity a certain content of a communication results in the consolidation of its basic vocabulary. At the same time we can incorporate also other simplifying elements, e.g. to divide a long sentence into independent clauses to leave out some less usual words etc. The understanding of the contents of a read text might be checked by means of brief clauses. We offer 3-4 clauses, the student defines the one which corresponds to the text. When the exam is given by a curriculum, we make sure that among the questions and tasks are such examples which check the active and passive language knowledge of longer segments of subject matter. It is suitable to give the exam term in advance.

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